

Lithuania's Urbsys, seated, at 1939 meeting with Stalin, right, and his foreign minister Molotov, far left.

The Memory of Lithuania

For Former Foreign Minister, Echoes of Soviet Promises

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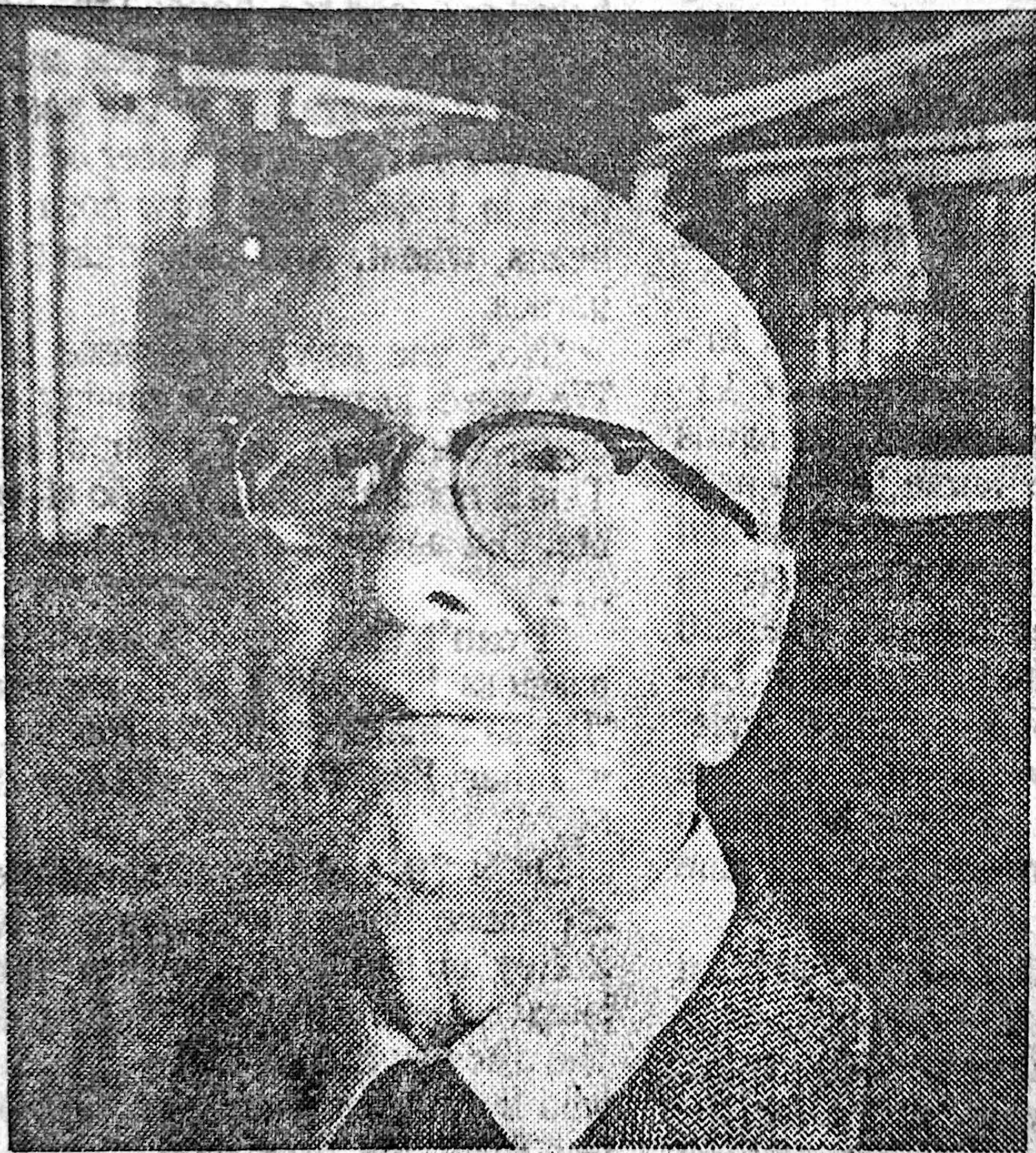
KAUNAS, U.S.S.R.—The afternoon sunshine flooded into the cramped two-room apartment as Juozas Urbsys unburdened himself of his memories: negotiating with Stalin and Hitler, the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, 11 years in solitary confinement, the deaths in Siberia of his closest friends and relatives.

"The fact that I lived so long seems like a miracle," said the former foreign minister of the prewar independent Lithuanian state, smiling at the tricks played by fate. "I am very lucky. I think that some higher being must have decided that I should live longer than my contemporaries so that someone could tell the world what happened to Lithuania."

Now age 94, Urbsys is the sole surviving witness to many of the backstage intrigues that resulted in the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic states under a secret deal with Nazi Germany. It was he who received the devastating ultimatum from Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov at midnight on June 14, 1940: Allow unlimited numbers of Soviet troops to enter Lithuania by 10 a.m. tomorrow morning or our army will occupy your country by force.

"It was more a declaration of war than an ultimatum," recalls Urbsys, whose mind is still sharp despite his advanced age. "It was the worst moment of my life. I felt betrayed, crushed, emotionally shattered."

For almost half a century, Urbsys's memories were a kind of political time bomb, ticking away beneath the



Juozas Urbsys in 1988.

Kremlin's version of history. According to the official history books, the three Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—became part of the world's first socialist state as the result of popular revolutions and the election of Communist-dominated parliaments. Millions of Balts knew in their hearts that this was a lie—but only Urbsys had direct, personal knowledge of what really happened.

Urbsys kept the truth bottled up inside him for many years, fearing that its premature disclosure would result in harsh recriminations. He had good reason for his caution. Many of his former colleagues in the Lithuanian leadership had either been killed by Soviet firing squads or had perished in Stalinist prisons. Five of his closest relatives—including his mother, father and elder brother—died in exile in Siberia. His younger brother was shot by Soviet police in Lithuania as a suspected "terrorist" soon after World War II.

As you listen to this old man reminiscing, you realize that his story is the story of 20th-century Lithuania. He was born in 1896, when Lithuania was a province of the Russian empire. As an officer in the Russian army in the First World War, he witnessed the collapse of both Germany and czarist Russia, the two great powers that through the centuries have determined Lithuania's fate. He saw Lithuania become independent in 1920 and then saw its independence snuffed out 20 years later.

It is only in the past few months, as the movement toward independence has gathered strength throughout the Baltic states, that Urbsys has felt able to talk freely to Western visitors. Last year, he published his memoirs in Russian and in English. Now, at the end of his life, he is finally being honored as an elder statesman, a link with a past that seemed to have vanished for good.

The most politically explosive of Urbsys's memories is his knowledge of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact—the secret protocol establishing Soviet and German "spheres of influence" in Eastern Europe in the event of war. Until last year, Soviet historians were still denying the existence of any such document, arguing that a copy discovered in Nazi archives at the end of the war was a forgery.

The agreement, concluded on Aug. 23, 1939, gave Nazi Germany the green light to gobble up most of Poland. The Soviet Union was given a free hand in Estonia, Latvia, Finland, western Ukraine and Byelorussia. Lithuania was originally assigned to the German sphere of

interest, but was later transferred to the Soviet sphere in exchange for another chunk of Poland and "7,500,000 gold dollars."

Urbsys found out about the deal between Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany when he was summoned to Moscow on Oct. 3, 1939, for the first of three meetings with Joseph Stalin. The Soviet dictator announced that the town of Vilnius—which the Red Army had just grabbed from Poland—would be returned to Lithuania. But there was a catch: some 35,000 Soviet troops would be stationed in Lithuania under a "treaty of friendship."

"But that means Soviet occupation," objected Urbsys, torn between his desire to regain the ancient Lithuanian capital and a fear that Lithuania's independent statehood was now in jeopardy.

"Our garrisons will be able to help you suppress a Communist uprising," smirked Stalin. "The Leader of Progressive Humanity," by this stage, had probably decided already that all three Baltic states would eventually be absorbed into the Soviet Union. The operation was conducted in stages in order to reduce armed opposition to a minimum and preserve the appearance of constitutional legality.

By concluding treaties of friendship with Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, and stationing troops on their territory, the Kremlin prepared the ground for subsequent developments. Incidents were fabricated—including the alleged kidnapping of Soviet soldiers—"proving" that the Baltic states were not living up to their "obligations" under the agreements.

Urbsys's meetings with Stalin all took place in the middle of the night, the dictator's favorite time for doing business. The role of bully boy was played by Molotov. Stalin acted the genial host, plying his guests with food and drink and giving them guided tours of the Kremlin. "Ivan the Terrible walked through these corridors," he reminded the Lithuanians.

"Stalin seemed an ordinary person. His behavior during the negotiations was very simple. But it was clear from his demands that he understood he had us backed into a corner," said Urbsys, leafing through a lined exercise book with meticulous handwritten notes on his negotiations with the Soviets.

After signing the treaty of friendship on Oct. 10, 1939, the Lithuanian delegation was treated to a bizarre movie show. One of the small Kremlin chapels had been converted into Stalin's private movie theater. As Politburo members launched into drunken songs, the Lithuanians were forced to watch films about the glo-

ries of Soviet sport and the River Volga. Urbsys did not get back to his hotel until dawn.

There was quite a different atmosphere when Molotov delivered his ultimatum to Urbsys, accusing the Lithuanian government of failing to live up to its treaty obligations. The Lithuanians were given 10 hours to form a new government to Moscow's liking and allow unlimited numbers of Soviet troops into the country. Senior Lithuanian officials who had displeased the Kremlin were to be brought to trial.

According to Urbsys, the Soviet minister made clear that Soviet troops would enter Lithuania, whatever the Lithuanian reply. Hoping to avoid bloodshed and anxious to preserve the facade of independence, the Lithuanian government accepted the ultimatum. Less than six weeks later, on July 21, 1940, a new Lithuanian parliament virtually hand-picked by Moscow voted unanimously to join the Soviet Union. Latvia and Estonia followed suit immediately.

"We were so naive," said Urbsys, shaking his head over his painful lesson in the reality of Stalinist diplomacy. "We thought that agreements would be honored. When the Soviet Union promised to respect our freedom and independence, we trusted them."

The Soviet occupation opened a tragic new chapter in the life of Urbsys and his countrymen. Executions and deportations to Siberia began almost immediately. Western historians estimate that some 35,000 Lithuanians—mainly prominent politicians and intellectuals—were deported in 1940 and 1941. Most never returned. A second wave of repression followed the war as the Kremlin pushed through a brutal campaign to collectivize agriculture by arresting the better-off peasants, or kulaks.

According to Western historians, Lithuania probably lost some 450,000 people—or 17 percent of its prewar population—due to deportations, executions and guerrilla warfare. Practically every Lithuanian family was affected by the deportations. Lithuanians like Urbsys who were identified with the prewar regime suffered the most.

A month after his last meeting with Molotov, Urbsys and his wife were arrested and put on a train to Tambov, in central Russia. The former Lithuanian prime minister and vice president and members of their families were seated in the same wagon. It was to be the last contact that any of them would have with the outside world for more than a decade.

For the next 11 years, Urbsys was shuttled from one prison to another, always in strict isolation. His identity was kept a secret, even from his guards. When asked his name, he was instructed to reply "number six." Occasionally, there would be nighttime interrogations, during which he would be questioned about his prewar encounters with Hitler and other German leaders.

"I think it was Dostoevski who said that a man can get used to anything. I became accustomed to prison life," said Urbsys. He now lives with his niece Maria, who also spent 15 years in exile.

While in prison, Urbsys addressed two memorandums to Stalin, appealing to him to restore Lithuanian independence at the end of the war. He argued that the Soviet Union's international prestige—and good relations with Western countries—was linked to the fate of the three Baltic states. Needless to say, he never received a reply.

It was not until 1952 that the Soviet authorities got around to putting Urbsys on trial. He was charged under Article 58 of the Russian pe-

nal code—"for active participation in an attempt by the international bourgeoisie to overthrow Soviet power"—and sentenced to 25 years imprisonment. He was sent to Vladimir jail, east of Moscow, where he was put in a cell with six other inmates.

The following year, on March 5, 1953, the wailing sound of dozens of factory and air-raid sirens penetrated the prison walls. Two days later, the prisoners learned that the "Great Father of the Soviet Peoples," the "Genius Leader of All Mankind" had died.

"At first we didn't think anything would change. *Le roi est mort. Vive le roi*," said Urbsys. "But then we heard about uprisings in the camps. Government commissions arrived to visit us."

Urbsys was released from prison on Aug. 27, 1954, 14 years after his arrest, along with the surviving ministers of the prewar Baltic states. For a short time, he worked as a cashier in a public bathhouse. A few months later, he was allowed to return to Kaunas, the prewar Lithuanian capital, on the condition that he never talk about his experiences.

As he nears the end of his life, Urbsys is again witnessing a resurgence of Lithuanian nationalism. In some respects, it reminds him of the great national revival at the end of the First World War when Lithuania regained its independent statehood after more than a century of Russian domination.

There are, however, significant differences. In 1920, both Soviet Russia and Germany were on their knees. Preoccupied with the civil war against the old regime, the Bolsheviks did not have the military force to control the Baltic states. Today, by contrast, the Kremlin clearly has sufficient military and economic power to enforce its will over Lithuania, at least in the short term.

Urbsys is a loyal supporter of Lithuanian independence. But his diplomatic training and 14 years in Russian jails have led him to take a rather more cautious approach than the present Lithuanian leadership under President Vytautas Landsbergis has. He constantly asks himself the question, "How will Moscow react to what we are doing?"

The former foreign minister believes that the 1939 treaty of friendship that he negotiated with Stalin and Molotov could be a basis for compromise. Resurrection of the treaty would commit the Kremlin to recognizing an independent Lithuanian state. But it would also provide a legal framework for the temporary stationing of Soviet troops in Lithuania and the recognition of Soviet security interests in the Baltic region. Furthermore, the secession of the three Baltic states (which all signed friendship treaties with Moscow in 1939) would not become a precedent for similar action by other Soviet republics.

So far, neither Moscow nor Vilnius has shown any interest in Urbsys's proposal. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev seems determined to make Lithuania go through the hoops of a new law on secession that envisages a popular referendum followed by a cooling-off period of up to five years. Landsbergis regards the friendship treaty as a one-sided document imposed on Lithuania against its will.

Urbsys describes Landsbergis as "an honest person, a patriot." But he also makes clear that he is troubled by the thought of the present confrontation with Moscow getting out of control. "Every morning I wake up with feelings of great anxiety. I wonder what the new day will bring," he says, with a perceptible shudder.

Then Urbsys suggests another cup of coffee. The sun is streaming through the windows. The medieval town of Kaunas seems so peaceful—and Moscow seems such a long way away.